

## Statement on the colonial context of Senckenberg Collections

In light of the ongoing intensive debate on colonial context in European collections (e.g. revised guidelines of the Deutscher Museumsbund 2019; workshop: "Politics of Natural History. How to decolonize the Natural Museum; Berlin 2018, *Eckpunkte-Papier des Bundes, der Länder und der Kommunen* 2019), Senckenberg addresses this topic responsibly and proactively. As curators, we may not always be responsible for the circumstances of acquisition of existing collections, yet we are responsible for contextualizing their history. We confirm our obligation to research and to disclose the colonial background of our collections, and to communicate it appropriately to the public (e.g., in exhibitions). Senckenberg perceives the reappraisal of the colonial context of natural history research institutions as an important step on the path towards cooperation with institutions in the respective countries of origin of our collections. We are convinced that agreements with the societies of origin will only be reached if all partners act on shared basis, and conduct an honest dialogue with the aim of reaching agreements. In addition to the primary interests of the countries of origin and their societies (e.g. identified for 17 African museums by Sebuliba 2019), the interests of the international academic community should also be taken into account.

There is no doubt that some of Senckenberg's collections were obtained in a colonial context, i.e. the objects were collected during the period of largely European expansionist policies in former German, or colonies of other European states, or in areas with "informal colonial structures". We agree with the guidelines mentioned above that the colonial context of an object is not *per se* synonymous with a problematic provenance, but that, if necessary, its circumstances of origin must be closely examined. In few cases only, have we been able to document the concrete history of a given specimen's origins (background to the collecting journeys, e.g. also the purchase of slaves by European explorers, actual acquisition circumstances, exchange of objects, etc.). On one hand, this is due to the history of our research museums in the 20th century, which is characterised, for example, by world war side effects such as relocations, losses, provisional arrangements and the lack of curatorial support. On the other hand, technically sound research requires experience in provenance research, for which additional resources should be made available by the funders. For Senckenberg's approximately 40 million collection objects, adequate documentation - however desirable - will therefore be nearly impossible in the foreseeable future, especially in view of the resources currently available. We believe, however, that financial support, e.g. through large, pending digitisation initiatives (e.g., DiSSCo), could fill significant gaps in access to metadata from historical collections. Against this background, we currently prioritise objects with a colonial context for a comprehensive analysis of their origin, and compare these with provenance research with regard to the Nazi era, which Senckenberg has also begun to address (Hansert 2018).

Crucial to us is the distinction between natural-historical material on the one hand and historically or culturally sensitive objects on the other. The latter include "human remains, religious and ceremonial objects and symbols of power" (Museumsbund 2019). Senckenberg's research collections traditionally contain very few ethnological objects and human remains from historical periods. Ethnological objects from the Frankfurt collections were already transferred to the *Weltkulturen Museum* Frankfurt/M. years ago. Natural history objects, collected by missionaries of the Moravian Church (Unity of Brethren of Herrnhut), which is active almost worldwide, were admitted to the collections of SMN Görlitz, yet anthropological objects were immediately passed on to the ethnographic museum. In the Palaeoanthropology collection Frankfurt about 200 human remains are included, the provenance of which still has to be investigated. All human remains from colonial contexts must be repatriated (Minister of State of the Federal Government for Culture and Media et al. 2019). However, this can only be done responsibly after provenance research has been carried out, and in collaboration with the societies and countries of origin. So far, human remains have been repatriated to Australia and New Zealand (Cawthorn 2014; Schrenk et al. 2018). Provenance research is supported by financial assistance from the German Centre for Cultural Heritage Losses. Senckenberg is active here with an application on human remains from Namibia.

Apart from human remains, which represent a very small proportion, the Senckenberg collections consist almost exclusively of natural history material (recent and fossil plants, fungi and animals, as well as rocks, minerals and meteorites). We will pay special attention to the aspect of provenance or the type of acquisition when working on all collections in the future. Senckenberg is committed to transparency with regard to the provenance of its collections and to public access to the relevant documentation. This has already been realised for numerous historical collections and collectors at Senckenberg through publications and, in some collections, through publicly accessible directories of the collectors and the provenance of their collections (e.g. [http://www.senckenberg.de/files/content/forschung/abteilung/botanik/index\\_collectorum.pdf](http://www.senckenberg.de/files/content/forschung/abteilung/botanik/index_collectorum.pdf)).

We are currently carrying out a baseline survey in all sub-collections in order to identify historically or culturally sensitive objects, but in view of the size of our collections these cannot be comprehensive.

Senckenberg pursues a future-oriented collection strategy that promotes geographically diverse and comprehensive collections as fundamental infrastructure for biodiversity research. Storing specimens of natural objects from a region in various museums around the world reduces the risk of information loss, for example in the case of fires, earthquakes, wars or any other unpredictable disasters. Scientific collections must be protected as an important resource of knowledge for science and society. It is essential that objects i) studied and documented in the original publications are professionally stored in collections, ii) often require special conservation maintenance, and iii) must be freely accessible for the international scientific community. Senckenberg supports capacity building and long term collaborative institutional research, e.g. in

Malawi, Kenya, Burkina Faso, Mongolia and Brazil. Senckenberg has been and is contributing to the transfer of knowledge and training of young scientists in collaborative research projects. Through Senckenberg Taxonomy Grants, we provide financial support for researchers from the countries of origin of our collections. Senckenberg is a partner in the international Master program “Biodiversity and Collection Management” at Technical University Dresden. Almost exclusively non-European students are trained in this program on the basics of taxonomy and museology. Each year, two students receive a scholarship by the Dietmar Schmid Education Fund.

We are convinced that close collaborative international research and the digitisation of collections are suitable and most important tools to support the countries of origin of specimens in our collections for enhancing research and building up collections in those countries.

In terms of Senckenberg's global scientific collaborations, we regard the exchange of object data and digitised material, the exchange of knowledge in infrastructure development (collection construction, management and preservation), research cooperation with scientists from the countries of origin and the training of young scientists as decisive elements in enabling a reappraisal of our colonial heritage. The Senckenberg collections are available to scholars from the countries of origin of the objects without restriction for research purposes and are used by around 700 guest researchers per year.

Summary of the recommendations for action:

- Transparency and access to the history of collections.
- Digitisation and publication of metadata (Aquila, Sesam, etc.)
- Prioritization of collections according to historically or culturally sensitive material: queries on such material to collection groups
- Repatriation of human remains after provenance research has been carried out.
- Third-party funding for SGN pilot projects (mainly Centre for Cultural Heritage Losses)
- Promotion of research, training and infrastructure cooperation with countries of origin (university partnerships; BCM Master; Taxonomy Grants; etc.)

## **Literature**

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